“The game of billiards has destroyed my naturally sweet disposition.” – Mark Twain, April 24, 1906

Among my literary loves is historical fiction, that malleable genre that permits imaginary, engaging storylines through the creative and (hopefully) well-researched use of real people, places, and events. (If you’re itching for a good read, check out some highly entertaining and educational examples, such as Twelve Fingers by Jo Soares, The Adventures of Kavalier & Clay by Michael Chabon, or The Alienist by Caleb Carr.)

Thus, I got a bit giddy when I first learned about and watched the December 1961 episode “Shattered Idol” from the fourth season of The Rifleman television series. The Rifleman was an American Western television show that starred Chuck Connors as Lucas McCain, a widowed Union Civil War veteran raising his son Mark (Johnny Crawford) during the 1870s and 1880s. The 30-minute episodes, all filmed in black-and-white, ran on ABC from September, 1958 to April, 1963.

The fictitious “Shattered Idol” episode begins with Samuel Clemens (aka Mark Twain, played by Oscar nominee Kevin McCarthy), in his trademark white suit, disheveled hair, and overgrown mustache, passing through the town of North Fork, New Mexico Territory in stagecoach, when his vehicle has wheel trouble, forcing a several day layover. Unexplainably crotchety and rude to the local denizens, including the young, author-worshiping Mark McCain, Twain opts to hole up in the town’s inn, with its solitary four-cushion billiards table, removed from any contact with anyone. So far, so make-believe (and the author’s surliness so intentionally bewildering).
In time, Twain emerges from his room and is prodded into making a billiards wager with Mr. Russell, the local cowpoke and pool shark, who says, “Here’s $70 you play billiards as well as you write: rotten.” Twain invites Mr. Russell to set up three balls anywhere on the table and that Twain can make a successful three-cushion shot (i.e., use the cue ball to hit the other two balls while also contacting three cushions). Twain makes the winner-takes-all shot, pockets the winnings, and dismisses his buffoonish opponent.

Twain’s demonstrated billiards acumen is rooted in history. According to biographer Albert Bigelow Paine, who wrote *The Boys’ Life of Mark Twain* (1916), Twain was passionate about billiards. Paine writes:

> Every Friday evening, or oftener, a small party of billiard lovers gathered, and played until the late hour, told stories, smoked till the room was blue, comforting themselves with hot Scotch and general good-fellowship. Mark Twain always had a genuine passion for billiards. He never tired of the game. He could play all night. He could stay until the last man gave out from sheer weariness, then he would go on knocking the balls about alone.

In fact, Twain’s billiards room served as his “office, study and private domain...away from the bustle of a busy household, it was the place where the author would write his great works, fanning the manuscripts on the billiard table to be edited.”[1]

“Shattered Idol” includes another historical fact – the early death of Twain’s son Langdon – which is revealed mid-episode to be the source of Twain’s dismissiveness and the rationale for his self-imposed isolation. Twain’s son Langdon died of diphtheria in 1872. In “Shattered Idol,” Twain believes he could have prevented his son’s death, citing it as his reason to discontinue writing the then-serialized novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. (In truth, Twain did lose interest in writing the famous American classic for several years, but the delay was not attributable to Langdon’s death.) Fortunately, for Huck, Jim, young Mark McCain, and millions of voracious future readers, the titular rancher Lucas McCain is able to help Twain overcome his grief (and save the imperiled novel) through a rematch on the billiards table. Twain is once again challenged by the local town hustler to a 5-point game of three-cushion billiards for $100. Lacking concentration and distraught with grief, Twain initially loses. But, when Lucas gives him a pep talk about not living...
in the past, Twain is able to rebound and makes a stunning, consecutive series of five three-cushion shots, thereby defeating the hustler, winning the wager, regaining his desire to live, and recommitting to finish writing *Huckleberry Finn*.

The “Shattered Idol” episode of The Rifleman is not currently available online or on DVD.


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